

Case Study: Puspa Kumari Toppo (12)



Puspa (foreground) with teammates from Yuwa Adivasi Club (Photo credit: Ashok Nath Dev for *The Hindustan Times*)

PUSPA KUMARI TOPPO, from the tiny tribal village of Hutup in Ranchi District, attends 7th class at a local government school. She is the fourth daughter (with one brother) of Muni Devi, a midday meal cook at the local government school who earns Rs 500 (\$11) per month, and Jhabu Oraon, a mason at a local hospital earning Rs 110 (\$2.40) per day. Her family has one cow and two oxen, and two small fields where they grow rice, wheat and vegetables.

For Puspa, it's been a big year. She has been with us since our first practice, barefoot, in a tattered yellow dress and red bandana – her uniform for six months – and she was the first chosen by the boys for their own team once they warmed to the idea of girls playing.

Before December, she had rarely ventured outside her village, when she traveled to India's premier football academy, Tata Football Academy (TFA), for a week-long training camp. Soon after, she was selected along

with twelve teammates from Yuwa for the State Girls' U13 team, and traveled to Tamil Nadu to represent Jharkhand at the All-India Football Federation (AIFF) National Football Festival.

She impressed national team scouts by launching a ball off her forehead (served up by her older sister Usha) past Bombay's goalkeeper – one of her many goals of the tournament where and her teammates chalked up wins against bigger and more experienced teams from Bombay (8-1) and Delhi (3-0). In a single year, she and her team elevated the state's ranking from an abysmal 20th to fourth nationally.

Puspa was one of forty-one girls in India to be selected for the AIFF U13 National Training Camp in Kerala, and after six weeks was selected for the Indian National Team. Appallingly, after she was selected for the team, Jharkhand Football Association failed to supply her paperwork, including her passport, for her to represent India in Sri Lanka. Over the course of two weeks, the state's two biggest newspapers covered this story, holding the JFA's director accountable for his carelessness, and demanding the JFA's U13 state girls' coach answer for charges he had demanded a bribe equal to two months' income for Puspa's parents to complete her passport.

Puspa is generally shy and quiet with adults, but on the field she lights up like a thousand lanterns. Slowly she has become a regular fixture at Yuwa Club's afternoon study sessions as well. "I think studies are important, and I'm happy," she says. "I want to be a good player. I was happy to score goals against Manipur (India's top girls' team). My mom and dad are also happy with me."



Puspa studying at home (Photo credit: Ashok Nath Dev for *The Hindustan Times*)